

DOMESTICATED DOMESTICATED!
SOME COMMENTS ON THE TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH OF
JOSÉ CARLOS SOMOZA'S *LA CAVERNA DE LAS IDEAS*

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Abstract:

In order to cater for an extended readership, crime fiction, like most popular genres, is based on the repetition of a formula allowing for the reader's immediate identification. This first domestication is followed, at the time of its translation, by a second process, which wipes out those characteristics of the source text that may come into conflict with the dominant values of the target culture. An analysis of the textual and paratextual strategies used in the English translation of José Carlos Somoza's *La caverna de las ideas* (2000) shows the efforts to make the novel more easily marketable in the English-speaking world through the elimination of most of the obstacles to easy readability.

Resumo:

Como a maioria dos géneros populares, o romance policial baseia-se na repetição de fórmulas que permitem a rápida identificação do leitor e procuram assim responder às exigências de um público alargado. Esta primeira domesticação é seguida, durante a tradução, de uma segunda, que elimina aquelas características do texto fonte que possam entrar em conflito com os valores dominantes da cultura de chegada. Uma análise das estratégias textuais e paratextuais utilizadas na tradução inglesa de *La caverna de las ideas* de

José Carlos Somoza (2000) mostra os esforços para transformar o romance num produto mais vendível para o público de língua inglesa, através da neutralização daquelas características que constituam um obstáculo à compreensão imediata.

Palavras-chave: domesticação, transparência, estratégias tradutoras, literatura policial.

Key words: domestication, transparency, translation strategies, crime fiction.

Together with women's fiction (or, derogatively, *chick lit*), crime fiction has been one of the bestselling popular genres since the late 19th century, when the working classes began to have wide access to basic schooling (thus turning into a significant part of the growing reading public), and mass publishing was made possible after the Industrial Revolution. Moreover, crime fiction, at least in English, has remained almost unchanged (Bloom 2002: 13) since Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes series established the definitive elements of the genre's narrative code: a mystery around a murder, a limited number of suspects, the gradual disclosure of a dark past (Scaggs 2005: 9), a detective endowed with unique analytic powers assisted by a committed amateur, and the presentation of the enigma as an intellectual game, a puzzle in which every piece leads to the discovery of the truth and to the final restoration of the social order first disrupted by the initial crime.

Like the folk tale (Propp 1981), most popular genres are based on the recombination of their defining elements, novelty in crime fiction being usually limited to the complexity of the puzzle itself and to how surprising the final revelation is to the reader.

What parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture. (Adorno 2001: 100)

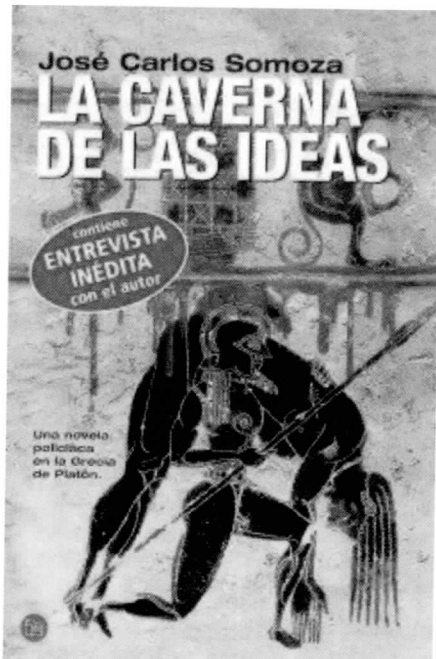
The reader's immediate recognition and identification, crucial in popular genres, depends on the reassuring repetition of the formula. Fiction can then provide a compensatory pleasure, as the narrative has a realistic approach to contemporary problems (even if the action takes place in a remote past) and offers imaginary solutions in tune with present cultural and ideological values. In the detective story, this identification process allows the reader to participate by proxy, following the investigator's deductions and discoveries and trying to anticipate his/her next move. A realistic, recognizable universe is therefore created (though without leaving aside a certain amount of fantasy – it is, after all, entertainment) through the use of simple language and unpretentious imagery, as well as of stereotyped characters with little or no psychological depth:

To give this pleasure, moreover, the narrative must be immediately comprehensible, and so the language must fix precise meanings in simple, continuous syntax and the most familiar lexicon. The emphasis on function, on communication and reference instead of the high aesthetic appreciation of form, makes the language seemingly transparent, thereby producing the illusion of reality that invites the reader's identification. (Venuti 1998: 126)

José Carlos Somoza's *La caverna de las ideas* is a typical *whodunit* containing all the ingredients making up the classical detective story. As customary for the genre, the investigation is set in motion by the appearance of the victim's corpse. When the maimed body of young Tramachus is found in the woods, Platonic philosopher Diagoras engages the services of Heracles Pontor, Decipherer of Enigmas, to discover the truth and capture the murderer. Working together, like an ancient counterpart of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, Heracles and Diagoras unravel a mystery leading them through Athens' underworld of occult sects and ritual human sacrifices. Presented as the translation-in-progress of an ancient Greek manuscript, the novel contains extensive diegetic footnotes added by the Translator, who at first only records the translation process and comments on the text's lexical choices. As the narrated events unfold, however, the Translator gets gradually more involved in a parallel story developing in the 'marginal' space of the

footnotes, until he finally becomes a character in the 'main' story, when the two worlds merge.

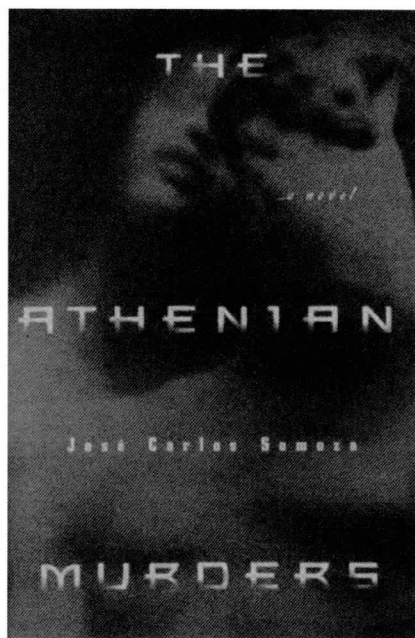
First published in Spain in 2000, *La caverna de las ideas* was translated into English by Sonia Soto, and was launched two years later as *The Athenian Murders* by Abacus in the UK and by Farrar, Strauss & Giroux in the USA. Winner of the 2002 Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger Award, by 2011 the novel had sold around 43,000 copies in the UK – a “very respectable number” according to the publishers (private email received on 6 April 2011), especially when compared with the little over 7,500 copies sold in Spain in the same period (phone-call to Punto de lectura on 18 April 2011). Although a number of external factors may contribute to *The Athenian Murders*' better performance (advertising and marketing strategies, the Crime Writer's Association's endorsement, reviews in the media and others), textual and paratextual (Genette, 1997: 3) translation strategies devised to cater for English-language crime fiction readers may also explain the success of the novel.



A first glance at the English, American and Spanish editions shows significant differences in paratextual elements, such as cover design, title and graphic layout. In the Spanish edition by Punto de lectura, neither the title *La caverna de las ideas* nor the cover suggest any immediate association with a specific literary genre. A Greek painting, probably a detail from an amphora or a decorative vase, is crossed horizontally by a blotched red line. Only this line and a sentence in small font (“Una novela policíaca en la Grecia de Platón”) ascribe the novel to the detective story, which is further confirmed by the synthesis provided on the back

cover. In addition, it announces the inclusion of an interview to Somoza, a best-selling author in Spain. On the contrary, the English title eliminates any reference to Plato's cave and anticipates the occurrence of a certain chain of events (the murders), taking place in a

specific location (Athens). This title structure has been typical of the detective story since its origins, from Edgar Allan Poe ("The Murders in the Rue Morgue", 1841) and Arthur Conan Doyle ("A Scandal in Bohemia", 1891) to more recent examples like Barbara Wilson's 1993 novel *Trouble in Transylvania*, although it became an identifying feature of the genre in the two decades between 1920 and 1940 (Scaggs, 2005: 51)¹. This type of title answers the question about "what", "where", and sometimes even "when" (like the direct association between Athens and classical Antiquity), thus providing the reader with an unequivocal framework for the story, as well as pointing to a specific sub-genre of the mystery novel, namely the *whodunit*, as opposed to the hard-boiled or the roman noire. It is also worth pointing out that this is not an isolated case but a fairly common practice by publishers – to mention only one example, Argentinean Guillermo Martínez's 2005 novel *Crímenes imperceptibles*, also translated by Sonia Soto in 2008, was published as *The Oxford Murders*.



In addition to the title, there are significant differences between the cover design of the Spanish and English editions and that of the American publisher. Whereas in the UK the Spanish cover design was kept almost the same, except for a few minor details (blue instead of ochre background, no red bloody line), the American version was marketed with a completely different cover, in which all trace of Greek Antiquity has disappeared and two apparently naked bodies of unknown gender join in a slightly erotic embrace.

The effort to make the book more marketable in the US can also be seen in the front

¹ Examples of these are some of Agatha Christie's titles: *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Death on the Nile* (1937) and *The Body in the Library* (1942), to mention but a few.

and back flaps, containing a detailed description of the plot, as well as an endorsement by the well-known Julian Rathbone and several quotes by prestigious publications like *The Evening Standard* and London's *The Times*. This need to advertise the author and his work to English-speaking readers, however, comes as no surprise – though José Carlos Somoza was a fairly well-known, twice-awarded author when *La caverna de las ideas* was first published in Spain, *The Athenian Murders* was the first novel by Somoza to be translated into English. It was then necessary to create a readership for the novel by both introducing the author and his work and highlighting the favourable reception given by critics and the media.

Other changes introduced in the text layout are further proof that *The Athenian Murders* aimed at a group of target readers different from that made up of Spanish-speaking readers. Those changes are especially conspicuous in the Translator's footnotes. As mentioned before, the Translator is more than a privileged reader of the alleged source text. In fact, as he gradually gets involved in the story, he interacts with the text and eventually with the other characters in the novel, becoming one himself. Main text and footnotes, or hypertext and hypotext (Genette, 1997: 5), appear as almost one single mass of text, as the Translator's notes, introduced by asterisks, are written in only a slightly smaller font than the main text. Longer notes, particularly at the end of each chapter, spread throughout the entire page, making the notes barely distinguishable from the main text. On the contrary, in *The Athenian Murders* the Translator's notes are clearly introduced by numbers and signalled by a noticeable difference in font-size. In addition, even the longest notes are always confined to the lower two-thirds of the page, leaving a blank space on the upper part, where the missing main text should be.

Several marks of domestication can also be found in the target text itself. It is beside the point to try to determine whether these interventions can be attributed to editorial policy or to Sonia Soto's individual strategies, as this paper does not deal with the translator's decision-making process but with the overall interventions affecting textual transfer. Therefore, a number of omissions intend to make the reading easier and more

agile, including passages of up to thirty lines completely cut out² (cf. Somoza 2007: 74-5). In other cases, passages are condensed and simplified by means of omitting long-winded descriptions:

ST:

[...]o entonar el rápido peán en la *oreibasía* nocturna, la danza ritual incesante que las mujeres bailan en la cima de las montañas durante los meses invernales. Y es sabido que muchas mueren de frío o de cansancio sin que nadie pueda evitarlo; y también se sabe – aunque ningún hombre lo haya visto nunca – que las manos de las mujeres, en tales danzas, manipulan peligrosos reptiles de velocísimo veneno y anudan sus colas con hermosura, como una muchacha trenzaría, sin ayuda, una corona de lirios blancos. (Somoza, 2007: 71)

TT:

[...] she could intone the quick paeon from the evening oreibasía, the ritual dance tirelessly performed by maenads on mountaintops in Winter, handling dangerous, swiftly poisonous snakes and knotting their tails beautifully, just as a young girl, without help, weaves a crown of white lilies. (Somoza, 2002: 43)

More significant, however, is the substitution of entire sentences:

ST:

–Confundes la eidesis con las redundancias– sonrió Helena–. A veces, los escritores repiten palabras en un mismo párrafo. En este caso, nuestro autor tenía en mente «lirio», y cada vez que pensaba en una flor escribía la misma palabra... (Somoza, 2007: 79)

² These extensive omissions have not been analysed as they might best be explained by the existence of different versions of the same source text, although no indication of a “revised edition” has ever been given by the Spanish publishers.

TT:

"I think you're confusing eidesis with repetition." Helena smiled.
"Writers sometimes repeat words in a paragraph out of carelessness, or
because they've run out of imagery." (Somoza: 2002: 47)³

Not only does the target text transform the Greek author's obsession (to which the Translator is also a victim) into carelessness, but, as repetition is the basis of eidesis, the literary strategy made up by Somoza, the English version highlights the deliberate nature of those repetitions, establishing a distinction between the author José Carlos Somoza and those other careless authors, as well as positioning the translator as a mere vehicle of the author's words: if the reader finds repetitions tiresome and redundant, only the original text shall be accountable for them.

As far as additions are concerned, the most substantial ones are used to clarify the text and make it more explicit. In the following passage, for example, Heracles Pontor's long tirade is fractioned by the introduction of a couple of reporting verbs and the description of the speaker's attitude:

ST:

[...] pero sólo el eco de sus pasos les seguía -. Estas callejuelas repugnantes, atiborradas de basura y mal olor... ¿Dónde está la ciudad «bien construida», como define todo el mundo al Pireo? ¿Es éste el famoso trazado «geométrico» de las calles que, según dicen, elaboró Hipódamo de Mileto? ¡Por Hera, que ni siquiera veo inspectores de los barrios, *astínomos*, esclavos o soldados, como en Atenas! No me parece estar entre griegos sino en un mundo bárbaro... Además, no es sólo mi impresión: este sitio es peligroso, puedo olfatear el peligro igual que el olor del mar. Claro que, gracias a tu animada charla, me siento más tranquilo. Tu conversación me consuela, me hace olvidar por dónde voy... (Somoza, 2007: 56)

³ Emphasis added.

TT:

[...] but only the echo of their footsteps followed them. He exclaimed in disgust, “These revolting, foul-smelling alleys, piled with rubbish! Where is the ‘well-constructed’ city, as Piraeus is always described? Is this the famous ‘gridiron’ layout of streets designed, it is claimed, by Hippodamus of Miletus? By Hera, I haven’t even seen any district inspectors, astynomi, or slaves or soldiers, not like in Athens! I feel I am not among Greeks, but in a world of barbarians. And this is more than my impression; this really is a dangerous place. I can smell danger as distinctly as the sea.” He glanced at Heracles again and added dryly, “Of course, I’m reassured by your animated chatter. Your conversation is so comforting, it makes me quite forget where I am.” (Somoza, 2002: 33)⁴

The effort to obtain a transparent text is not limited to these small additions. The target text also avoids the long periods - so frequent in Spanish - and adapts the syntax to the English norm, splitting long sentences into two or three shorter ones.

ST

Un viejo frente a él agitaba sus espesas canas, como sumido en el éxtasis de un baile privado, mientras sostenía algo con la boca: parecía como si le hubieran abofeteado hasta destrozarle los labios, pero aquellos pingajos de carne que resbalaban por sus comisuras no eran suyos. (Somoza, 2007: 307-8)

TT

An old man in front of him was shaking his thick gray hair, as if in a private, ecstatic dance. There was something hanging from his mouth. He looked as if he had been slapped in the face until his lips split, but the shreds of flesh dangling from the corners of his mouth were not his. (Somoza, 2002: 199)

⁴ Emphasis added.

In chapter VIII, Menaechmus, the main suspect of the murders, is captured by the authorities. Two soldiers discuss Menaechmus's arrest, their dialogue reproduced by means of direct speech without quotation marks or dashes:

Dicen que sonreía, No, no sonreía. ¡Sonreía, Hárpalo, lo juro por los ojos de lechuza de Ateneal ¡Y yo por el negro río Estigia: no sonreía! ¿Tú estabas cerca de él? ¡Tan cerca como ahora lo estoy de ti, y no sonreía: hacía una mueca, pero no era una sonrisa! ¡Sonreía, yo también lo vi: cuando lo cogisteis de los brazos entre varios, sonreía, lo juro por..! Era una mueca, necio: como si yo hiciera así con la boca! ¿Te parece que estoy sonriendo ahora? Me pareces un estúpido. Pero ¿cómo, por el dios de la verdad, cómo iba a sonreír, sabiendo lo que le espera? Y si sabe lo que le espera, ¿por qué se ha entregado en vez de huir de la Ciudad? (Somoza, 2007: 271)

The passage conveys both the triviality and the speed of the exchange as the two soldiers interrupt each other. In the English version, however, the text is normalised and the effect created by the source text eliminated:

"They say he was smiling."

"No, he wasn't."

"I swear by owl-eyed Athena, Harpalus, he was smiling!"

"And I swear by the black river Styx that he wasn't!"

"Were you near him?"

"As near as I am to you now, and he wasn't smiling – he was making a face!"

"He was smiling; I saw him, too. When several of you grabbed him by the arms, he was smiling. I swear by--"

"It was a grimace, you fool; he did this with his mouth! Do I look like I'm smiling?"

"You look like an idiot"

“But by the god of truth, how could he possibly smile, knowing what awaits him?”

“If he knows, why did he give himself up instead of fleeing the city?”

(Somoza, 2002: 173-4)

Normalisation of infrequent collocations runs across the entire target text. This should come as no surprise, since normalisation, or standardisation, is one of the most usually observed phenomena in translated texts, and has been studied by a number of translation scholars such as Gideon Toury⁵, Mona Baker (1996) and Dorothy Kenny (2001), among others. To a large extent resulting from the demand for transparency made by publishers, critics and even readers, normalisation erases those stylistic and lexical characteristics that may call the reader's attention to the fact that the text is a translation: “[t]he illusion of transparency is an effect of fluent discourse, of the translator's effort to insure easy readability by adhering to current usage, maintaining continuous syntax, fixing a precise meaning” (Venuti, 1995: 1).

Somoza's writing tries at all times to surprise the reader, by means not only of a tightly knitted plot but of infrequent, often far-fetched, metaphors signalling an instrumental use of language which alludes to and eventually turns into imagery - after all, eidesis, as conceived by Somoza, may be described as the gradual manifestation of a figure made up by the very words within the text. Soto's translation, on the contrary, offers a fluent text of smooth surfaces, where most of the obstacles to easy readability have been removed. A short list of examples is shown below; all quotations are verbatim without inverted commas, followed by the page number between brackets; emphasis added in all cases.

ST

TT

un amasijo de reventones y desgarros	a confusion of splits and tears <u>crusted</u> with
<u>florecidos</u> de sangre cuajada y tierra reseca	congealed blood and dried mud (3)
(9)	

⁵ Growing standardisation is one of the exemplary laws put forward by Toury (1995: 267-8).

parecía contemplarlo con ojos <u>deshabitados</u> (30)	appeared to be watching him through <u>empty</u> eyes (17)
un <u>breve musgo</u> de pelo plateado en la cúspide (33)	a <u>short tuft</u> of hair on top (19)
los ojos [...] en sus <u>tronos</u> de pestañas negras (55)	their eyes [...] <u>surrounded</u> by black lashes (32)
el sol <u>se despeñaba</u> con fogosa violencia (89)	the sun was <u>beating down</u> (54)
sus miradas <u>amanecían paulatinamente</u> sobre las islas de mármol (194)	they <u>discerned</u> islands of marble (123)
una <u>cordillera</u> de sábanas blancas (195)	a <u>row</u> of white sheets (124)
los rollos de papiro <u>lo sitiaban</u> (208)	<u>He was surrounded</u> by scrolls (133)
Permaneció así <u>toda la eternidad de la expectación</u> (260)	He remained thus <u>for what seemed like an eternity</u> (167)
<u>atesoró</u> en sus pulmones el aire perfumado del jardín (293)	<u>filled</u> his lungs with the fragrant air of the garden (189)
Las paredes <u>menstruaban</u> perlas rojas (303)	The walls <u>exuded</u> red droplets (196)
entre jadeos <u>hidrófobos</u> (306)	panting <u>frenziedly</u> (198)

Thus the target text meets the expectations of the target culture – accessible language fixing precise meanings through simple syntax and familiar lexis makes the reader's identification process easier. Emphasis on familiarity, function and communication guarantees that the text will reach the highest possible number of readers.

For identification to take place, the target text must often respond to the dominant values of the target culture, providing “the narcissistic experience of recognizing their own culture in a cultural other” (Venuti 1995: 15). An example of this is provided by the treatment of the two main female characters in the novel - Helena, the Translator's colleague and occasional lover, and the prostitute Yasintra. In the last footnote of Chapter I, the Translator expresses his suspicion that he is translating an eidetic text; Helena's ignorance of eidesis (“¿Un texto qué?”, Somoza 2007: 25) introduces a description of this

literary device created by Somoza. A few lines below, in the course of the same conversation, Helena has forgotten the word:

-Lo que no entiendo – prosiguió Helena sin darle importancia al asunto - es por qué el autor consideraba tan secreta la idea de un león como para ocultarla mediante... ¿cómo has dicho?

-Eidesis [...] (Somoza 2007: 26)

In the English version, Helena's second utterance is slightly modified, and what could be taken as foolishness in the source text is neutralised, so that now she seems to have quickly learnt the new concept:

"What I don't understand", Helena went on casually, "is why the author thought the idea of a lion so secret that he had to hide it through eidesis." (Somoza 2002: 14)

When Yasintra runs away after they first approach her, Heracles Pontor and Diagoras hide in a street corner hoping to surprise her on her way back home and to question her about Tramachus. When she finally turns up, it is so dark that they can hardly make out her shape. In the struggle that follows, Yasintra is always described as a "thing" trying to break away, whereas the English text uses "figure" and "shadow", reducing the effect of the woman's dehumanisation.

ST

Hubo un forcejeo. Heracles Póntor se abalanzó sobre la cosa [...] La cosa respondió, [...] la cosa asintió con la cabeza [...] Díagoras percibió cómo la cosa se convertía, sin pausas, en una mujer. (Somoza, 2007: 63-4)

TT

There was a scuffle. Heracles Pontor threw himself upon the figure [...] The figure tried to strike back [...] The shadow nodded [...] Diagoras

felt the flat, anonymous, blurred figure that he held firmly against the wall
turn quickly into a woman. (Somoza, 2002: 38)

Translated by a woman, it would be relatively easy to attribute these changes to Sonia Soto's individual convictions and ideologies. It is also possible to argue that it is little convincing that Helena, a Greek teacher who knows the classics, should have never heard of eidesis and forget the word a few seconds later. In this case, the modification in the target text corrects a slight inconsistency in the character's personality⁶. It must be pointed out, however, that women represent 75% of fiction and popular literature readers, and that the female market is essential to the publishing industry (Bloom 2002: 73). Moreover, in England and the USA women have won equal rights long before Spain and Latin America, aspiring to prominent positions in the labour market. It is safe to assume then that these readers would not willingly accept women to be depicted as things or as fools.

In any case, it is clear that these are domesticating strategies, however mild, in that both the publishers' and the translator's loyalties, as understood by the *Skopostheorie* (Nord, 2006) are target-oriented, providing readers with a self-referential experience through a manipulation mechanism that eventually turns into the repetition, with only minimal variations, of formulas which have already proved successful (Adorno 2001: 66-7).

A last example of cultural domestication can be observed in the transformation of "religión" into "sect" or "cult". The investigation leads Heracles Pontor and Diagoras to discover that, far from being innocent victims, Tramachus and other ephebes were willing participants in propitiatory ritual killings. Though in the source text Crantor refers to the set of his dionysiac beliefs as a "religion", the English version downgrades it to the category of "sect" or "cult":

ST

La gente oye hablar en secreto de nuestra religión y quiere conocerla.
(Somoza, 2007: 375)

⁶ This interpretation, tough, raises the age-old issue of the translator's legitimacy to operate this type of transformation.

Yasindra no pertenece a nuestra religión [...] (*ibidem*: 377)

TT

People hear of our cult and want to know more. (Somoza, 2002: 243)

She doesn't belong to our sect [...] (*ibidem*: 244)

The choice of these two negatively connoted terms leaves Crantor's faith out of the rituals consecrated by the Western tradition. Thus the translated text makes an unmistakable distinction between what can and cannot be considered a religion. Whether deliberately or not, *La caverna de las ideas* subverts a widely accepted classification to which American, and generally Anglo-Saxon, culture is particularly sensitive. The target text restores the order - to each thing its proper name, allowing readers to remain within their comfort zone.

Conclusion

The typical realism of popular aesthetics demands discourse and translation strategies that cater for mass reading publics. The publishing industry chooses realistic texts that reinforce readers' social, religious, moral and ideological values, thus favouring identification through an almost narcissistic experience. In addition, translated texts are required to 'read well' and be transparent, as if they were 'originals' themselves. To that end, a familiar, idiomatic language with little or no syntactic complexity avoids calling the reader's attention to the artifice of the often unavoidable domestication that every translation involves.

Therefore, crime fiction, probably like all popular genres, goes through a double process of domestication in order to guarantee that the text reaches the highest possible number of readers. On the one hand, the source text results from the self-referential expression of an industrial consumer society, organised according to aesthetic categories corresponding to political and economic forces. On the other, translation strategies wipe away those characteristics that may come into conflict with the dominant values of the target culture or prevent the reader's immediate recognition, at the same time that erases

those linguistic characteristics calling the reader's attention away from the narrative sequence.

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